DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 331 060 CS 212 765

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TITLE Click Here...No, Here...Maybe Here: Anarchy and Hypertext.
PUB DATE 22 Mar 91
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (42nd, Boston, MA, March 21-23, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Activism; Communication (Thought Transfer); Computers; Higher Education; *Hypermedia; *Information Technology; Interaction; Power Structure; Reader Text Relationship; Rhetorical Theory; *Text Structure; Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Author Text Relationship; Empowerment; Literary Theory; Text Factors

ABSTRACT

Academic theory about hypertext indicates that hypertext use makes concrete postmodern and post-structuralist theories of text. When it is said that hypertext offers a new type of freedom and power for readers and writers, what are some of the things that are signaled implicitly? In conservative hypertexts, "choice" means being able to choose among options offered by the author of the text. In the type of freedom and choice offered by an anarchistic hypertext, every person has free access to read every piece of information in the network and to write his or her own text into the network. Such systems allow, even encourage, each person, to question, to challenge. At this anarchistic end of the spectrum, the only "controlling" aspect of the computer and the hypertext program is to make sure that no person controls any other. But while anarchy can help break down repression, it has its own problems at the local level of the reader/writer's experience with the text and at the global level of social action, in the connection between discourse and practice. Empowering students as they read and write in hypertext in classes is only the first step in empowering them in the rest of their lives. The two problems--complete, confusing anarchy in a hypertext and the potential for the loss of broad, social goals--can be addressed to some extent by considering the purposes and goals of working in hypertext. (One diagram is included.) (TD)

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Paper prepared for the panel "Anarchy and Hypertext"
CCCC 1991, Boston 22 March 1991

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Anarchy and Hypertext

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Prologue: A Personal Confession

I want to start by admitting straight off that I have a carefully controlled, but highly romanticized view of hypertext. My mom had Harlequin romances, Danielle Steel and Barbara Cartland novels. I have *Computer Lib* and *Dream Machines* and *Interactive Multimedia.*

I'm a little embarrassed by this confession, but there's something to be said for the wild rush of intellectual excitement a person can get from reading something like John Sculley's foreword to a book called *Interactive Multimedia: Visions of Multimedia for Developers, Educators, and Information Providers.* Near the end of his emotional foreword, John Sculley, who was then an Apple Computer bigwig, exclaims that the hypertext/hypermedia systems in the rest of the book he is introducing, "are the tools of near tomorrow and, like the printing press, they will empower individuals, unlock worlds of knowledge, and forge a new community of ideas" (ix).

It's hard to remain pessimistic or even detached in view of such noble goals. After a few pages of reading heady stuff like this, I begin to view myself as a cyberpunk revolutionary, half man, half hypertext machine, full of wild potential, a bright power surge of anarchy and liberation.

This sounds, I know, pretty sarcastic. But I'm satirizing myself, not John Sculley. Sure, John Sculley's just an advertiser selling $10,000 Macintosh systems. But Sculley's not a stupid person; even advertising (and maybe especially advertising) contains some grain of truth. He knows what freedom freaks want. Sculley recognizes the driving hunger behind the adoption of hypertext in academia, especially the adoption of hypertext in the humanities curriculum: we have a hunger for overthrow, for revolution.

Recent academic writing reflects this revolutionary intent, although in a more subdued form. Academic theory about hypertext indicates that hypertext use makes concrete postmodern and post-structuralist theories of text, that the visible, rather than only psychic nature of the deconstruction and social construction as they occur in hypertext may necessitate a radical rethinking of the roles of reader and

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writer (Bolter 147; Moulthrop "Hypertext") and re-definition of what we mean when we talk about literature (Moulthrop and Kaplan) and even literacy (Reubens; Johnson-Eilola). Hypertext, according to some, is at heart a forum for questioning the authority of text, of author, a place where readers can assert control over the author's text (Barrett xiii; Bolter 154).

Corporate and Academic Revolutionary Discourse

These are powerful claims to make for the influence of hypertext on writing and reading. I don't think these claims are wide of the mark, but I do think they run the risk of easy misinterpretation. Aside from a few of the more flamboyant actors, most academic hypertext theorists carefully avoid the appearance of rousing the masses for revolution. On the other hand, if we say, however quietly, that hypertext radically changes our notion of meaning, text, if we say that hypertext use undermines the notion of authority in text, if we appear, as most revolutionary hypertext writers do, to welcome that undermining of authority, can it be anything *but* a call for revolution, not only textual but social?

Ellen Barton in a recent essay on the lack of discourse criticizing computer use in writing, addresses this strange paradox in which both revolutionary and corporate discourse about computers and writing tell us to do the same thing: buy more technology. In the end, if we advocate hypertext as a revolutionary tool, we are saying that revolutionaries should *buy* their way into empowerment, in effect, saying that the first step in revolution is to head down to BusinessLand and put a MacII on the Gold Card.

Almost no one claims that hypertext can be dis-empowering. Pessimistic or even critical perspectives on hypertext are most notable in their absence (Harpold). In 1987, Jef Raskin characterized literature on hypertext use as "generally effusive and non-critical" (325). More recent work by scholars such as Jay Bolter, Stuart Moulthrop, Nancy Kaplan, John Slatin, and others exhibits more care in terms of critical analysis, but, in the end, even these writers, usually say that hypertext is basically a good and useful technology. Michael Joyce, some time ago, made a distinction similar to the conservative/anarchistic one I'm making here, distinguishing between exploratory and constructive hypertexts. His distinction is a crucial one, but it hasn't been fleshed out in great enough detail and, for the most part, revolutionary academic theory about hypertext ignores the conservative/exploratory side of the spectrum; only the positive examples of constructive/anarchistic hypertext are dealt with in any depth. In this pro-technology stance, Barton notes, the anti-dominant discourse of empowerment through hypertext use is consumed and neutralized, becoming the dominant discourse of the status quo. In speaking from the left, we may end up confirming the discourse of the right.

Clearly, hypertext is neither the leader of the revolution nor some silicon anti-Christ. We are at a stage, though, where I think we need to question more deeply than we have so far, to question not only the advertisers and the corporations but

also our own characterizations of the potential for hypertext. A few people are finally beginning to take more difficult stances on hypertext, most notably Davida Charney's recent concerns the lack of a cognitive grounding for promoting hypertext use, and Catherine Smith's observation that current hypertext systems primarily support goal-directed processes rather than socially and historically situated discourse. These views are important, but only a starting point. Here, I would like to start another avenue of critique, to investigate some of the things that we signal implicitly when we say that hypertext offers a new type of freedom and power for readers and writers.

Conservative and Anarchistic Freedom

By definition, hypertext always offers more choice, more textual freedom than does a linear text. But "freedom" and "choice" are such vague terms, describing an extremely broad range of potential reading and writing activities.

Briefly, we could start exploring the range of freedom or choice offered by hypertext by defining the endpoints, what I'll call conservative hypertext and anarchistic hypertext. By "conservative" hypertext, I mean those hypertexts that are primarily designed as a sort of "information-transfer" type of document: the text is fairly static, and the reader's job is to retrieve some specific piece or body of information. In conservative hypertexts, "choice" means being able to choose among a finite set of options that are offered by the author of the text.

Examples of "conservative" hypertexts include common things as on-line manuals and database, such as a hypertext grammar and style handbook for which I received an advertisement a few months ago. Now, I don't want to re-start old arguments about the merits of teaching grammar, but I don't think we could call such a hypertext "revolutionary" in the sense that I'm trying to highlight and examine here. Such a hypertext promotes functional literacy, giving people the ability to "get along" in society, not encouraging them to change it. It appears that the function of this hypertext is to allow students to more effectively—and more quickly and easily—conform to standards of upper-class, white language usage. Apple Computer's recent slogan "The Power To Be Your Best" might be translated as "The Power To Be Your Company's Best."

On the other end of the spectrum, we would find anarchistic hypertexts, those hypertexts that might claim as their rallying cry "The Power To Be Authority's Worst Enemy." In the type of freedom and choice offered by a more anarchistic hypertext,, everyone has free access to read every other piece of information in the network and to write their own text into the network; each person can quote another—no matter what their age, sex or social or literary status. Such systems allow each person, even encourage each person, to question, to challenge. As John McDaid writes, a hypertext like this contains no "preconceived truth, waiting to be discovered," but encourages reader/writers to think of the "truth" as "a potential, lurking in a Heisenbergian way...," what the reader makes of such a text depends on the specific contexts and actions of that reader. At this anarchistic end of the

spectrum, the only "controlling" aspect of the computer and the hypertext program is to make sure that no person controls any other.

What is interesting in examining this range, from conservative to anarchistic hypertext, is that in some ways the idea of a fluid range can help us address Ellen Barton's cautionary observations about the dominant and the anti-dominant discourse merging. On the surface, the writings of many advertisers and theorists both appear "revolutionary" or at least empowering. But there is a crucial difference between the two "revolutionary" discourses about hypertext: Conservative, corporate hypertext sees the hypertext as being "out there," what Greg Ulmer calls a sort of metaphorical "new frontier" to be explored, a place where information can be found, taken back and used to enhance personal and corporate productivity. In conservative hypertext, the text enforces its own privileged status. On the other hand, more anarchistic hypertexts encourage the reader to see "information" in a hypertext in deconstructive or social constructive terms, with the hypertext as a starting point, as something that they need to work with, extend, challenge, and discuss with other writers and readers.

In discourse about hypertext, revolutionary writers such as Moulthrop, Bolter, and others often have in mind one specific type of hypertext at one specific point in the range of freedom, usually toward the anarchic side of the spectrum. Perhaps due to the extent to which hypertext advertising and theory appear, on the surface, to bear the same message, readers of these revolutionary academic theorists might easily mistake those observations and theories as being applicable to any type of hypertext.

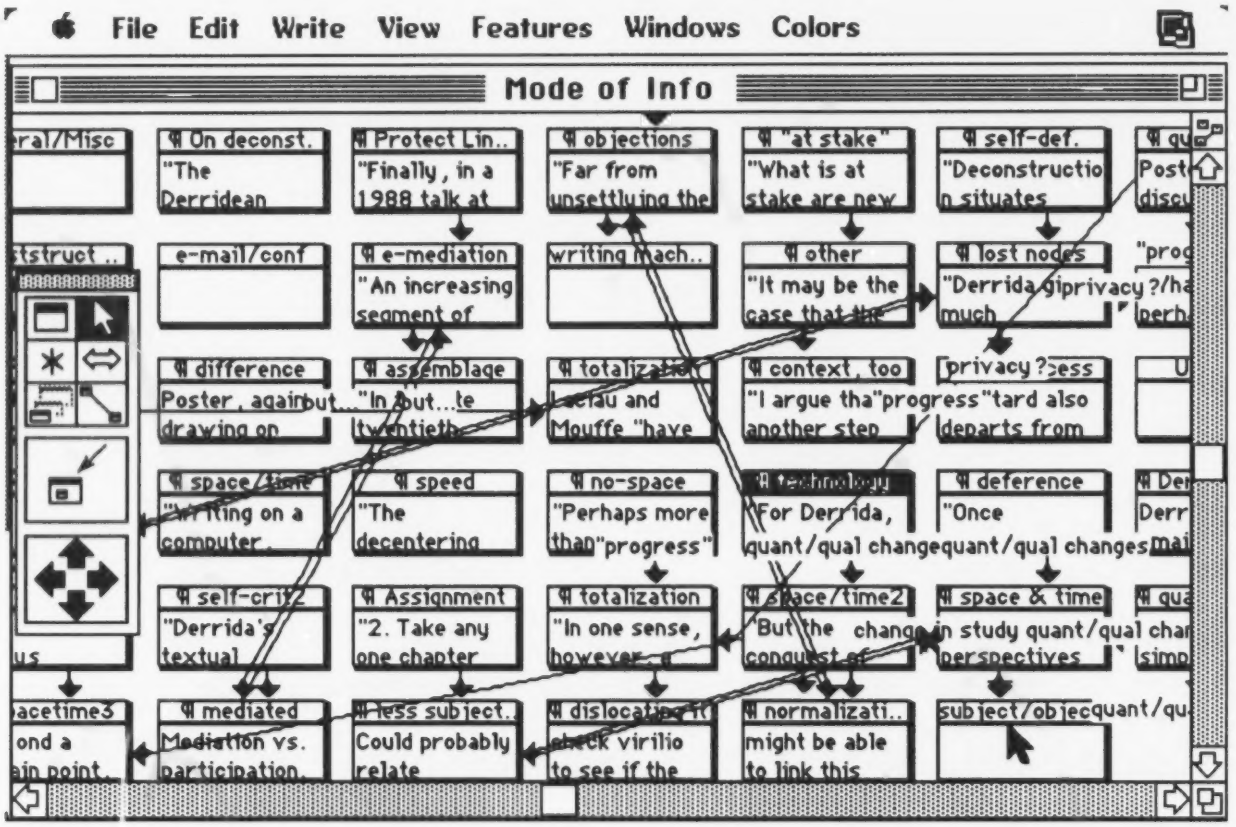
To further complicate matters, despite the labels I've given, many hypertext contains qualities from both ends of the spectrum, or, at least, affords the type of writing and reading that could characterize both ends of the range. In trying to determine where a particular hypertext or hypertext authoring program roughly belongs on the spectrum, you have to consider not what the hypertext offers as potential, but what it *encourages:* what the program makes easy and what it makes hard. HyperCard, as Michael Joyce points out, is most commonly used as a presentational device (11), closer to what I call the conservative end of hypertext. HyperCard can be used for either type of hypertext, but the difficulty in attaching links to individual pieces of text (especially if a person wants to revise the text later), and HyperCard's emphasis on a database, rather than text, approach discourages the use of HyperCard for anarchistic hypertext.

Local and Global Problems with Anarchy

It's obvious that I think anarchistic hypertexts are more valuable tools for social change. But while anarchy can help break down repression, it has it's own problems. There are a host of factors to look at, but, for now, I would like to highlight two key difficulties with using anarchistic hypertexts for revolution, problems at the local level of the reader/writers experience with the text and at the global level of social action, in the connection between discourse and practice.

The first difficulty is one that doesn't seem directly related to any particular social context, but to the general notion of freedom in writing and reading a hypertext. The

problem, which is something of a local, textual difficulty, occurs during the relatively goal-free rush of anarchy that can occur when someone works in a completely open hypertext system.



At one point in the process of writing this presentation, I was going to spend about half my time discussing how I ended up writing this hypertext. After a while, though, I realized that this picture doesn't really show the anarchy, it just looks tangled up. This tangled appearance, though, is often a matter of screen design; conservative hypertexts can be as confusing as anarchistic ones, sometimes more so. The reason that I think this type of hypertext is anarchistic is that, in writing the hypertext, I continually kept every option, every possible association open. Every time I saw some connection, often merely the repetition of a key term, I added another node, made another link. This graphic here is just a small chunk of a pretty huge file, something like 15,000 or 20,000 words of text and one or two hundred links, most of which I never bothered to label.

What is anarchistic is the freedom I had in *constructing* this text, freedom I took full advantage of without any real purpose or goal—I felt that if someone offered me so

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much freedom, I'd better use it. What I got, though, was a text with no cohesive voice—even in the portions where all of the words are mine, it's difficult to discern any sense of purpose, more reaction than action. I used anarchy to break down barriers between isolated sections of text, but I didn't really do much beyond that, nor did I do it for any conscious reason.

In a minute or two, I'd like to talk more about this problem, but first I'd like to discuss a second, more serious problem and after that, some observations that pertain to both problems.

A number of critics of computer technology have noted that what takes place on the computer screen does not necessarily reflect what takes place in the world outside; the deconstructive tendencies of electronic text discussed by Mark Poster, Moulthrop, and Bolter, for example, are characteristics that rely primarily on the non-physical nature of computer text.

But when something like hypertext is espoused as a revolutionary technology, even if the masses are able to overcome the extremes of anarchy and conservatism in order to gain some middle ground from which they might effect social change, it's easy to forget that a hypertext is a *virtual* text; "virtuality" means, after all, only a possibility , something that is *almost* real. Dragging a frowny-face icon over the hypertext entry for George Bush might be amusing, but it does little to change George Bush's position in society.

Computer communications and liberating hypertexts might play some small role in bringing about social change, but the highly celebrated empowering capabilities of hypertext may encourage people to forget their overall goals. Empowering our students as they read and write in hypertext in our classes is only the first step in empowering them in the rest of their lives. In the screenshot I showed earlier of the extremely anarchistic hypertext I wrote, I made connections between hypertext nodes not because I had some overall goal, but because I could. These two problems in hypertext: complete, confusing anarchy in my hypertext and the potential for the loss of broad, social goals can be addressed to some extent by considering the purposes and goals of working in hypertext.

In talking about goals, I want to include both the local and the global, with the observation that any work in hypertext is, to a large extent, only a local goal. The anarchy of a hypertext can, like deconstruction, encourage richer understanding and creativity (Lynn). But this understanding should only be a single step in the broader goal.

The early twentieth-century sociologist Karl Mannheim observed both the potential and limits of anarchy when he discussed three possibilities for anarchy in a revolution: (1) to remain anarchy, a continuation that means the anarchists continue to break down but not construct anything new; (2) the anarchy can turn inward and become a purely mental thing (which, as well, avoids any social change); and (3) the anarchy can be subsumed into another idea, another goal or purpose. The anarchy in this instance is liberating in that it breaks down the

limitations of the current repression, but it's energy then is transferred into reconstructing a new system. The third option, for the anarchy to become subsumed into another goal, seems to hold the most potential. Both political revolutionaries and computers and writing theorists have pointed out the short-lived but empowering potential for anarchy in this sense. Antonio Gramsci points out anarchy exists on the margins of other portions of society, working from the border to change the interior. Gail Hawisher and Cindy Selfe, writing about the marginal status of computers and composition (although without using the terms "anarchy" and "revolution"), observe as well that these margins are places where we still have freedom to make choices for ourselves, choices that could not be made as easily if we were more "protected" by institutions. Langdon Winner, current technosocial systems "[succeed] through the conquest of disorder and imposition of form" (75). The anarchy of hypertext and our own marginal status give us some small degree of freedom in formulating our own uses of technology. "Controlling" anarchy sounds like something of a paradox, but if we want hypertext to be a tool for social change, I think that we need to use anarchy carefully, as brief but necessary step in breaking down textual barriers prior to reforming things.

What I find most important in everything I've covered today is the ideas of purpose and goal, things that can be lost in the positive discourse of both corporate and academic writing about hypertext. Although its sometimes inspirational and motivational to think of technology as some shining hero, it's also misleading. Our views and uses of technology necessarily place us within the system of capitalist consumption; we cannot change the system by denying its existence. Technology critic Jennifer Slack says that critical analysis of the relationships between communications technologies and society must begin with the premise "There is no revolution" (146). I think the revolution—both textual and social—exists as a possibility or as an isolated, but heartening, occurence; characterizing the revolution as widespread or immanent disguises the immense distance between our current state and a revolution. The difficulty in characterizing hypertext as a component in a real revolution is that is currently too easy to consider any form of hypertext as an agent of change. Hypertext can just as easily—and perhaps, today, more easily—be used as as an oppressive technology, a way to uphold the status quo of current social conditions.

We need to begin paying more attention to the assumptions behind revolutionary discourse, to begin examining more carefully the specific types of hypertext that we read about and use in our classes, as well as articulating why we use hypertext in our classes; and finally, and perhaps most importantly, to look beyond the text to envision and enact changes outside of our classrooms.

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